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SUBJECT: RUSSIA BEGINS ONE-YEAR CONSCRIPTION REQUIREMENT
WHILE STRUGGLING WITH MILITARY PROFESSIONALIZATION

¶1. (U) Summary. Russia has adopted a multipronged approach to the professionalization of its military: seeking to enhance the quantity and quality of its conscripts by reducing the numbers of exemptions and limiting the draft to one-year; shifting the balance of forces within the military between contract and conscript; and endeavoring to make contract service more attractive with increased pay and better quality of life conditions. However, the 2006 law on military conscription which came fully into force on January 1, 2008, fails to tackle adequately the continued problems of hazing, Russian demographics, and abysmal living conditions for enlisted men. The overarching failure to make significant changes in Russia's military doctrine will continue to make it difficult for Russia to meet its manpower and professionalization goals. End summary.

One-Year Mandatory Military Service

¶2. (U) Following the Second Chechen War, Putin reportedly became convinced that a conscript army was ineffective to defend the country and to engage in new high-tech, rapid-reaction, counter-insurgency and counterterrorist operations. In 2003, Putin and the military leadership reached a solution to develop a cadre of professional soldiers able to handle future regional conflicts, with the goal of having 70 percent contract and 30 percent conscript servicemen by 2010.

¶3. (SBU) At the same time, Putin insisted on also cutting conscription service from two years to one year. This decision was opposed by the military leadership, but was a popular political move, and partially intended to help deal with the serious problem of hazing in the military. In June 2006, the Russian State Duma passed the law cutting the term of conscription from two years to 18 months in 2007, and then to one year in 2008. Along with the cut in length of service, the new law also eliminated a number of exemptions from serving and imposed stricter requirements for registration of 17-year olds and for approval of exemptions. According to most estimates, up to 90 percent of draft-age men avoided service by taking advantage of the numerous exemptions, including for university or technical education, health, hardship, alternative service, and other reasons, and by paying bribes to officials to escape being drafted. Aleksandr Golts, Deputy Editor-In-Chief of the Weekly Journal, noted that "avoiding military service became the national sport."

¶4. (SBU) Deputy Chief of the General Staff Vasili Smirnov claimed that the new regulations would double the number of

conscripts. Officials would be expected to approve fewer exemptions, to undertake greater efforts to identify and register 17-year olds and to make 18-year olds report for service, to enact programs to address health issues at an earlier age, and to ensure border guards scrutinized more closely the reasons young men were going abroad and refused exit to those who appeared to be dodging the draft. Also, there would be more effort to enforce the requirement that those who received university and technical education exemptions served their term after they graduated. Then-Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov said in 2005 that the military was made up of "workers and peasants," because so many Russians with access to education were obtaining exemptions. Tatiana Parkhalina, Director of the Center for European Security, agreed that going to a one-year term would increase the percentage of those entering service, noting that one year was psychologically more palatable. Golts disagreed, predicting that draft-age men would still seek to avoid service, by paying bribes to local officials, or emigrating abroad. Both acknowledged, however, that Russia's demographics would make it very difficult for Russia to meet its manpower goals.

Positive Impact on Hazing?

15. (SBU) Ministry of Defense officials also contended that going to a one-year term for conscripts would help reduce the serious problem of hazing, and thereby eliminate one of the principal reasons young men sought to avoid service. Some experts, including Parkhalina, and Aleksandr Belkin, Deputy Executive Director of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, agreed, noting that most hazing was done by second-year conscripts of first-year recruits. Others,

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however, like Golts and Valentina Melnikova, Executive Secretary of the Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committee in

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Russia, argued that officers were increasingly carrying out the hazing, and they did not anticipate a significant decrease in the amount or severity of cases. Golts noted that Russia did not have an effective Non-Combatant Officer (NCO) corps, and in its efforts to create one, it was simply forcing specialists to sign contracts as Sergeants. With little supervisory experience, he argued, these new NCO's would continue to see hazing as an easy way to keep discipline.

Demographics and Corruption Undercut Manpower Goals

16. (U) The MOD declared its intention to cut the number of active servicemen from over 1.3 million in 2001 to 1.1 million by 2011-2015, and to achieve 70 percent professionalization of the forces by 2010. According to demographic statistics, the number of males reaching military age annually was 1.5 million in 2005. Given current demographic trends, that number is expected to drop to roughly 840,000 by 2009. To maintain the forces at the levels desired, Russia would need to draft approximately 400,000 - 500,000 young men in 2009 (since all those drafted in 2008 would leave service after one year). Even if the exemption rate dropped below 90 percent, the MOD would be hard-pressed to meet their conscript-level goals.

17. (SBU) Similarly, the MOD has had to cut its anticipated number of sergeants and soldiers switching to contract duty from 144,000 to 100,000. General Smirnov has acknowledged that 20 percent of contract positions remain vacant. According to Golts, the MOD was drawing most of its professional soldiers from the ranks of current short-term personnel, many of whom were being forced into signing contracts through the use of "deceit, fraud, psychological pressure, and violence." He added that many of these

contract soldiers were simply not returning from leave. Rather than seeking them out and forcing them to return to duty or face disciplinary action, he said, many commanding officers were not reporting their absence and pocketing their pay instead. Additionally, MOD estimates were that only 15-19 percent of contract servicemen were renewing their contracts upon expiration. Golts estimated that only about 50-75,000 of the reported 100,000 professional forces were actually available for service.

Systemic Problems and Lack of Resources

¶18. (SBU) The MOD has taken a number of steps to improve quality-of-life conditions, including increasing pay and pensions, establishing educational benefits, and constructing thousands of new housing units for enlisted personnel, in order to make both conscription and contract service more attractive. Vitaly Shlykov, Founding Member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, noted that Defense Minister Serdyukov has made improving the quality of military housing and conditions a top priority.

¶19. (SBU) However, Shlykov, and other experts, noted that there was still a significant housing shortage and much existing housing was in very poor condition. Furthermore, salary and pension increases, while substantial (pay increases were 15 percent in 2007), could not keep up with inflation rates in Russia (inflation has averaged 10 percent annually over the past five years). Thus, perceptions among draft-age males were still of difficult living conditions, and insufficient remuneration and benefits. These, coupled with the fear of being killed or seriously injured in hazing incidents, continued to make serving in the military unappealing to many young men.

Doctrine Does Not Match Planning

¶10. (SBU) Finally, according to most experts, despite the announced goal of using professionalization to modernize the Russian military and make it better able to handle regional conflicts and insurgency and terrorist operations, the military brass continues to base its doctrine on the need for mass mobilization of the army, and sees conscription as the best way to get large numbers of cannon fodder into the field fast. Thus, some experts, including Golts, predicted that,

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in the face of significant manpower shortfalls beginning in 2009, the military leadership could seek to reinstate the two-year draft.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The change to a one-year term for conscription and accompanying exemptions are likely to lead to a slight increase in the numbers of young males carrying out their military service, but systemic problems in the Russian military, such as hazing, low pay, poor living conditions, negative perceptions, and corruption will not disappear in the near future. Similarly, while the Defense Ministry will (reluctantly) continue to carry out the Kremlin's edict to professionalize the army, its failure to overhaul its doctrine, coupled with inadequate defense spending and demographic trends, will make meeting its long-term goals increasingly challenging.

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